

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

1. A method of establishing a computer-based communications session involving a user of a computer, said method comprising:

determining the availability of a potential participant in the communications session; and

according to the determined availability, displaying information on a display screen of the computer.

2. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein said determining comprises retrieving availability information for the participant from a data structure.
3. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the data structure is stored on an additional computer.
4. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein said displaying comprises displaying, for a given participant, availability for each of multiple communications applications.
5. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein said displaying comprises displaying, for a given communications application, a list of participants available for a communications session using the communications application.
6. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the availability information for the participant is within an object in an object-based programming approach.

7. The method as recited in claim 6, wherein the object further comprises participant identifiers effective to identify the participant to each of multiple communications applications, and indication of the availability of the participant for each of the multiple communications applications.
8. The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:
- receiving from the user notification of a desired communications application to be used for the communications session; and
- if the potential participant is available using the desired communications application, retrieving a participant identifier effective to identify the participant to the communications application.
9. A method of configuring computer-based communication, said method comprising obtaining availability information indicating the availability of a user of the computer for communication using each of multiple communications applications.
10. The method as recited in claim 9, further comprising displaying the availability information on a display screen of the computer.
11. The method as recited in claim 9, further comprising sending the availability information to an additional computer.
12. The method as recited in claim 9, further comprising obtaining respective user identifiers effective to identify the user to each of the multiple communications applications.

13. A system for computer-based communication, said system comprising:
- a display screen;
- means for determining the availability of a potential participant in a computer-based communications session; and
- means for, according to the determined availability, displaying information on the display screen.
14. The system as recited in claim 13, wherein said means for determining and means for displaying comprise a communications aggregation program stored on a storage medium within the system.
15. The system as recited in claim 14, wherein the display screen and storage medium are associated with the same computer system.
16. The system as recited in claim 14, wherein the communications aggregation program is adapted to access a data structure including participant availability information.
17. The system as recited in claim 14, wherein the data structure and communications aggregation program are stored on different storage media associated with different computer systems.
18. The system as recited in claim 13, further comprising:
- means for receiving, from an initiator of the session, notification of a desired communications application to be used for the communications session;
- and

means for, if the potential participant is available using the desired communications application, retrieving a participant identifier effective to identify the participant to the communications application.

19. A computer-usable carrier medium, comprising:

first program instructions executable on a computer for determining the availability of a potential participant in a computer-based communications session; and

second program instructions executable on the computer for, according to the determined availability, displaying information on a display screen of an initiating computer used by an initiator of the communications session.

20. The carrier medium as recited in claim 19, wherein the first and second program instructions are within a communications aggregation program stored on the carrier medium.

21. The carrier medium as recited in claim 19, wherein the initiating computer is the same computer on which the program instructions are executable.

22. The carrier medium as recited in claim 19, further comprising:

third program instructions executable on the computer for receiving from the initiator of the communication notification of a desired communications application to be used; and

fourth program instructions executable on the computer for, if the potential participant is available using the desired communications application, retrieving a participant identifier effective to identify the participant to the communications program.

23. A computer-usable carrier medium, comprising a data structure storing information indicating availability, with respect to each of multiple communications applications, of a potential participant in a computer-based communications session.

24. The carrier medium as recited in claim 23, wherein the data structure further stores the information indicating availability for each of multiple potential participants.

25. The carrier medium as recited in claim 23, wherein the data structure further stores a set of participant identifiers effective to identify the potential participant to each of the multiple communications applications.

26. The carrier medium as recited in claim 25, wherein the set of participant identifiers and the availability information for each participant are within an object in an object-based programming approach.

27. The carrier medium as recited in claim 23, wherein the potential participant is a user of a computer within which the carrier medium is located.

28. A method of establishing a computer-based communications session involving a user of a computer, said method comprising:

receiving from the user notification of a desired communications application to be used for the communications session;

determining the availability of a potential participant in the communications session; and

if the potential participant is available using the desired communications application, retrieving a participant identifier effective to identify the participant to the communications application.

29. The method as recited in claim 28, wherein said determining comprises retrieving availability information for the participant from a data structure.

30. The method as recited in claim 28, further comprising, according to the determined availability, displaying information on the display screen of the computer.

31. The method as recited in claim 30, wherein said displaying comprises displaying, for a given participant, availability for each of multiple communications applications.

32. The method as recited in claim 30, wherein said displaying comprises displaying, for a given communications application, a list of participants available for a communications session using the communications application.